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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 1415  
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY PRIORITY 1008  
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1196  
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND PRIORITY 0228  
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 0629

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000531

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 12/4:

REF: SUVA 528

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

#### Summary

1. (C) The Fiji coup may have officially commenced in late morning, 12/4, when Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) troops confiscated the firearms of the Police Tactical Response Unit (PTR). At mid-afternoon, the RFMF set up a road block on the outskirts of Suva, reportedly to block "thugs" from entering the city, though it may also have been an attempt to nab PM Qarase. The Fiji Post newspaper reportedly shut its doors today in the face of RFMF threats. Beyond that, at COB Suva remained quiet. Some political leaders are speaking out against a coup, as are a number of NGOs, churches, and some traditional leaders. The President and Vice President remain reticent at a time when many are looking for them to press loudly for rule of law. We sense the public is coming to realize that this time Commodore Bainimarama is not bluffing. Few in Fiji, and certainly very few ethnic-Fijians, relish a coup, contrary to Bainimarama's belief. If/as the coup proceeds, tensions may rise within the RFMF and between the RFMF and civil society. We will be watching carefully. End summary.

#### Army disarms the PTR

2. (C) At around 11 a.m., six RFMF vehicles visited the Police Tactical Response Unit (PTR) headquarters on the outskirts of Suva. The PTR is the one police organization trained to use firearms, and its close-down is one of Bainimarama's demands to Qarase. An Army request to see the PTR firearms brought an initial response that only the Home Affairs Minister could so authorize. That brought a lull until police agreed to allow just a viewing. Once the Army had access to the weapons, they reportedly loaded them up and took them away. The Acting Police Commissioner complained to the media that, aside from the RFMF deceit, the confiscation of firearms has taken away from the PTR its capacity to deter armed criminals and/or terrorists. Note: Police sources had already made clear to us that they had no intention of confronting the much more heavily armed RFMF. End note.

#### Road block from the interior

3. (C) At mid-afternoon, the RFMF reportedly set up a check point on the main road that approaches Suva from Naitasiri Province, in Fiji's interior. Naitasiri is home to some of Qarase's strongest backers. Its High Chief, a leader of Qarase's political party, remains in jail for crimes committed in 2000. Reportedly, an RFMF officer explained the road block is aimed to screen traffic, not halt it, with the

intention to keep thugs from entering Suva. That said, in late afternoon a helicopter flew into central Suva with PM Qarase on board. Apparently he was in Naitasiri today, so the RFMF road block may have actually been intended to nab the PM.

#### Opposition Leader and FLP Leader on rule of law

14. (C) During the weekend, Mick Beddoes, Opposition Leader in Parliament, made completely clear his opposition to a military takeover. The leader of the Fiji Labor Party, Mahendra Chaudhry, stated publicly that he would only take a role in government if that government is legally constituted. Rumors have circulated that Chaudhry is prominent on Bainimarama's list for an interim government.

#### Quiet from Government House

15. (C) Bainimarama told the media over the weekend the only person he would listen to is President Iloilo, who last week issued a statement affirming his support for democracy and the rule of law. Vice President Madraiwiwi may be attempting to facilitate communication between Bainimarama and Qarase; however, neither Iloilo nor Madraiwiwi has been visible the way one might hope such leaders would be with democracy on the line. (Note: some coup scenarios floating around Suva suggest the President will declare that Qarase no longer has the ability to govern, will remove him, and will authorize Bainimarama's interim government. The reality is that under Fiji's Constitution, the President has no such power; so such a plot would be just as illegal as a straight-forward coup.)

#### NGOs gear up protests

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16. (C) After Bainimarama's Thursday evening media conference in which he left no public doubt of his intention to remove the Qarase Government, it appears that civil society came awake. Until then, possibly many activists figured the current bombast was simply more of what Fiji has been experiencing from the Commodore for several years. Three local NGOs (the Pacific Center for Public Integrity, Transparency International/Fiji, and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement) placed full-page ads in Sunday and Monday papers asking people to sign and fax them an "open letter" to Bainimarama: "Yes to democracy; no to coup." The ad includes Bainimarama's fax, e-mail, and mobile phone numbers in case people want to register dismay directly. We hear a number of faxes have followed. The same groups applied for a police permit to march for rule of law. Reportedly, the police denied the permit, worried that a peaceful march could get hijacked into violence.

#### Churches rally the flock

17. (U) PM Qarase has asked everyone in Fiji to pray for God's help to resolve the crisis. Qarase and his wife were pictured on the front page of the Fiji Times taking communion. According to the press, many pastors used Sunday sermons in Methodist Churches to ask their flocks to encourage RFMF personnel not to obey unlawful orders and to support rule of law and democracy.

#### High Chief weighs in

18. (C) The High Chief of the Burabasaga Confederacy (one of the three big confederacies in Fiji; oversees the clans in the Suva area) is also the Education Minister. She has called a chiefly meeting, reportedly to reconfirm her view that the RFMF must not engage in any illegal actions within her territory, i.e. in the Suva area. With the RFMF composed almost entirely of ethnic-Fijians, quite a number of whom would come from Burabasaga, cohesion within the RFMF may be tested. Qarase's visits to the Savusavu area on Friday and to Naitasiri Province today could well be other attempts to

stir ethnic-Fijian protests.

Fiji Daily Post flees after RFMF threat

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19. (U) The Fiji Daily Post newspaper, managed by a relative of PM Qarase's wife, has been a thorn in Bainimarama's side for many months. The Sunday Post on its front page asked Australia for political asylum for all staff. Today the newspaper reportedly closed its office and staff fled the scene with computers in tow, having received repeated threats from the RFMF. We hear the Post may attempt to keep publishing, perhaps via the internet.

Comment

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110. (C) Suva has been quiet all day. The public remains nervous about what Bainimarama's "peaceful transition" will mean. The general public is finally coming to focus on "coup," is remembering how devastating the previous ones were for Fiji, and is coming to realize how stubborn and, at times irrational, Bainimarama seems to have become. With the Army having all the firearms and with Bainimarama giving repeated public assurances that his intended "peaceful transition" will include maintaining safe streets, we figure the immediate future is likely to be fairly orderly, unless the streets fill with protesters, either from churches and NGOs or from ethnic-Fijian communities upset if/when the ethnic-Fijian army has deposed an ethnic-Fijian PM.  
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